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**MUSA HALL REMEMBERED:  
TEACHER, MUSICIAN, AND CLERK AT  
FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH IN MARTIN, TENNESSEE**

**Marvin Downing**

Who was Musa Hall in Martin, Tennessee? Marvin Downing did not know in 1969, almost 20 years after her death and even later. Though occasionally he heard of the Musa Hall Sunday School Class or saw it in print at First Baptist Church in Martin, he had no idea who she was or what she did. Naturally as years passed fewer people remembered her. Certainly between at least 1900 and 1950 most members of the congregation knew as did numerous Martin residents. Eventually Downing would learn she was as an outstanding Bible teacher, musician, and church clerk.

Musa Hall's father Dr. Benjamin Franklin Hall was well known in the Martin area and quite active at the Martin Baptist Church between 1889 and 1898. Born January 1, 1840, he served in the Civil War, and later in both houses of the Tennessee legislature where he was a notable proponent of prohibition. While practicing medicine around Martin for thirty plus years prior to his death, he comforted patients with the Christian gospel. In 1889, he and his second wife Mary Catherine McClelland Hall by letter joined Martin Baptists in 1889. He sometimes served as moderator in business conferences and once was assigned to set a date for a revival, then often called a protracted meeting, and to find an evangelist for that, too. Unfortunately on May 12, 1898, after a year's illness, he passed into

glory. Then the church eulogized his service and life.<sup>1</sup>

Relatively little is known about Musa Hall's earliest years. On February 15, 1877, she began life in the vicinity of Sharon about eight miles south of Martin. Three years after moving to Martin, Musa expressed faith in Christ and was baptized into the congregation where she worshipped for the remainder of her life. She greatly aspired to be a concert pianist. That ambition was thwarted by poor vision from an illness and limited mobility from a fractured wrist. Though she finished college during 1895, sources do not name the institution. Maybe she attended Union University, a Baptist college 50 miles away in Jackson, Tennessee. Through the years First Baptist and Union have had a relatively close relationship. Albeit limited to two students in 1896, she "began a long and highly successful teaching career" in music.<sup>2</sup>

Four years later in 1900, the Martin Baptist Church and the Beulah Baptist Association formed Hall-Moody Institute in the west part of Martin.<sup>3</sup> Then only twenty-three years old, Musa Hall headed the music department there throughout the school's twenty-seven years of existence.<sup>4</sup> Writing perhaps about 1914, her prominent fellow church associate Tom H. Farmer claimed she was the only faculty member to have taught at Hall-Moody from the beginning. He conjectured, "She has probably taught more pupils and issued more Certificates and Diplomas in Music during these years than any one music teacher in the South." With an assistant or two she instructed sixty or seventy students instrumentally and vocally. Consequently her

students served prominently in several states and even "received distinguished standing in Germany's greatest Conservatories." Further, he added, she kept musically current by traveling to concerts and studying with master teachers. Probably the most Hall-Moody students she had at one time were 105 during the 1920-1921 school year.<sup>5</sup>

Providentially 1914 proved quite significant. Farmer decided to donate a pipe organ to the church in honor of his wife Lena C. Farmer. That year while in Chattanooga Musa for the first time met Mrs. Maude Mather Hall, a non-relative resident there. She was a wealthy Presbyterian quite interested in developing organists. She footed all expenses for Musa to study pipe organ with the noted Dr. John W. Bischoff of Washington. Musa even visited the organ company to become familiar with its operation and parts.<sup>6</sup> Once the organ was in place in 1915, she became the head organist and almost immediately trained assistant organists. Because she had been given much, she early decided to teach fellow members the organ at no charge. Those persons promised to play the organ for their congregation at no charge. She adhered to that approach the rest of her career.<sup>7</sup>

In 1922 Musa Hall asked for two assistant organists and chose Martha Todd and Musa Oliver. Similar requests occurred numerous times in later years, too.<sup>8</sup> Interestingly she recommended that the adult choir select the church organist, and quite predictably, she was the one. Actually that procedure was followed for many years. However, in 1942 Sister Margaret Joy Parish served as Choir

Director after many years of the versatile and capable Musa Hall holding that position.<sup>9</sup>

With First Baptist permission Musa Hall even instructed Presbyterians and Methodists on the organ. One local Methodist was Miss Marilucille Dodd (later Mrs. Elmer Counce). One day the youngster sat watching while Miss Musa played the organ. Immediately Hall asked if she would like to take organ training. Marilucille was delighted, so she had her first pipe organ lesson then. According to Counce, each student and her church had to sign an organ training contract. That recollection is in line with the Martin Methodist pastor requesting Miss Musa to teach Marilucille so that the latter could become an assistant organist. Little wonder that Marilucille testified, "Miss Musa was the sweetest person."<sup>10</sup> In 1948 First Baptist allowed the Martin Methodist organist to practice here during repairs to the Methodist auditorium. In all likelihood, too, Hall's church affiliation more nearly assured that the Philharmonic Music Club, to which she surely belong, could use the organ for a Saturday concert and otherwise have an evening organ recital.<sup>11</sup>

From her stay at the organ company, she developed some insights if the organ was not functioning properly. Consequently she became a sort of resident technical source, and through the years she got plenty of opportunities in organ problems. Early she insisted that the organ be properly protected from the heat generated from installing stoves in the basement.<sup>12</sup> She and other members must have been dismayed that the relatively new organ had motor problems by 1922.<sup>13</sup> At times organ proponents even felt they had little

congregational support. Understandably other organ adjustments were necessary through the years.<sup>14</sup>

Judging from the unanimous standing vote, not controversial was the addition of organ chimes in 1947. The committee instructed to shepherd that modification consisted of Pastor H.H. Boston and prominent members Russell Duncan, Treasurer M. D. Biggs, and Musa Hall. In fact, she signed for the congregation. Surely she also participated in deciding to have a baby grand piano in the auditorium and funding of it.<sup>15</sup>

Organ training was not always free or easily arranged. In the depression years the church allowed Musa Hall to give organ lessons to Miss Cecil and Miss Mildred Burchard with the tuition going to the church. Sometimes bartering took place. Young Ben Rowlett could take organ lessons if he paid for practice electricity and possibly played for the church. Because of prohibitive winter auditorium heating costs, FBCM asked aspiring trainee Miss Derryberry to delay organ lessons till the spring months. Fortunately during World War II circumstances improved. Upon First Baptist's initiative Musa Hall trained Rebecca Whitson (Mrs. Ronald Nilsen) and Miss (Joan?) Bullington that they might be able to serve the church as organists later."<sup>16</sup>

Moreover, Miss Musa had church piano responsibilities. In the 1920s she was to have those turned in time for a revival and a music class commencement.<sup>17</sup> In the 1930s she and that class also had to pay for the coal and electricity used in the annex in addition to tuning. On another

occasion she focused on the auditorium piano instead of annex instruments.<sup>18</sup>

One can only wonder what sort of contact Musa had with Hall-Moody student E. M. Bartlett. He was chosen as the First Baptist Sunday School Song Leader in 1915. Six years later, probably returning to Martin, he was the song leader during a revival. Perhaps he was best known for composing "Victory in Jesus" very late in his life.<sup>19</sup>

The Martin congregation selected Miss Musa early and often during her majority. When a notable elderly single woman died in 1903, Musa was one of four women selected to write resolutions of respect for the deceased. Likely also due to musical background, Musa became the third member of a committee to choose congregational song books, a position that also required raising funds to purchase *Gospel Hymn*.<sup>20</sup> About a year later the church opted to have an accurate church roll; the church clerk drew the assignment with Musa as assistant. Quite possibly this is the list in the front of Record Book I. Having proved herself then and later occasions, in time she was named assistant clerk.<sup>21</sup>

In 1913 the people named her church clerk, an office she held till her death in April, 1950. Inked in were the words "Musa L. Hall took charge of Book here." Besides superbly handling those responsibilities, she made a second copy of the minutes lest the original be destroyed by a disaster as was the earliest volume. In addition, during World War I she received responsibility for corresponding with First Baptist's service personnel and protesting discontinuing pastors at military camps.<sup>22</sup>

Musa had an eye for some levity even in business meetings. Late one year long time deacon G.W. Hall, as usual, moved to adjourn the business session. Musa observed, "Excepting a very few times Bro. Hall has made this motion for the past eleven years." A sequel was that somehow "Someone got ahead of Bro. G. W. Hall and made the motion to adjourn."<sup>23</sup>

Naturally there were lots of serious times. Predictably many elderly members passed during her tenure. Among them were charter members of the church, leading deacons, prominent Ladies Aid Society leaders, and former pastors. Of the last group many members greatly loved I. N. Penick, who had pastored from 1896 to 1918, the longest pastorate in First Baptist history.<sup>24</sup> Memorable, too, was Dr. Will Wood who in the mid-1930s had worked to reconcile differences between the First Baptist and Central Baptist congregations. So also during his serious illness in mid-1941, it fell to Musa to telegraph First Baptist's concerns to him.<sup>25</sup> Of course, most sadly she recorded her mother's death in 1940.<sup>26</sup>

Especially difficult was the early 1920s hearing into the misconduct and otherwise of Pastor Beasley who consorted with a Martin black woman fifty miles south in Jackson, Tennessee. Understandably the situation attracted considerable attention. Besides shepherding First Baptist, he also taught at Hall-Moody College, the local Baptist school. Consequently the Tennessee Baptist Convention even sent a representative to observe. The lengthy proceedings were confusing and controversial which probably made it difficult for church clerk



Musa to follow and record. Whatever her personal feelings she recorded the numerous motions. In the end First Baptist lost its pastor and unity. In addition, the emotional split among the congregants generated more work for the clerk; in days she issued about 100 letters for the formation of Central Baptist Church, the most in First Baptist history and reputedly among Tennessee Baptists for decades.<sup>27</sup>

Musa definitely could keep a confidence while still recording events accurately. In late 1938, as far as First Baptist was concerned, then pastor Stigler abruptly resigned. Musa quietly recorded the following: "(Church Clerk's note: Bro. Stigler had accepted a call from the First Baptist Church, Blackwell, Oklahoma. The First Baptist Church of Martin knew nothing about the arrangement with Blackwell Church until he offered his resignation. This not[e] was not read in Conference.)"<sup>28</sup>

Other church business did not always go smoothly. To enhance the church's presence, it opted to have an outside bell. Musician Musa Hall was among those enthusiastically contributing toward the purchase. A committee did the necessary preparations and received a bell which was somehow unsatisfactory. The company, though preferring the church try the bell a while longer, was willing to exchange the bowl. Actually both parties acted slowly. In late 1914 the bell committee received congregational approval to turn down the bell and return it.<sup>29</sup> In early 1915, however, the church clerk recorded the bell committee members "were moving along in the same old way, nothing new having taken place." After deacon intervention, the congregation ultimately paid for

the bell and left it near the building; actually some parishioners thought the bell's sound satisfactory farther away.<sup>30</sup>

Who would have thought Musa would survive her mother by only ten years. Indeed, death took the daughter rather unexpectedly. She suffered a stroke on a Sunday and was hospitalized on Monday when she was placed on oxygen. By Friday she was somewhat improved. Within a week she had a heart attack, though, and died about sunrise Easter morning on April 9, 1950.<sup>31</sup>

Evidently Miss Musa kept personal records, too, judging from a biographical sketch her pastor H. H. Boston submitted to *The Church Musician*, a Southern Baptist publication. She instructed 49 organists though she aspired to teach fifty. She tutored 996 piano students, falling four short of her goal of 1,000 pupils. According to Boston, she had been church organist for 36 years, a piano and organ instructor for 54 years, and a First Baptist member for 62 years.<sup>32</sup>

Musa Hall provided for others in her will. As the last surviving member of her immediate family, she left her home property at 211 University Street, in her words, "to my beloved First Baptist Church, Martin, Tennessee." For whatever reasons, she further stipulated the house be dismantled within 30 days of her passing. The salvaged materials would be used to build a First Baptist parsonage on that lot. If there were unused resources, those could be sold with proceeds to the church. If the congregation did not accept her gift, the dwelling would be torn down, and the materials and lot sold. The money would go equally to the Baptist Orphanage at

Franklin and the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board. Naturally First Baptist accepted her gift. In fact, the congregation maximized its largess by marketing the current pastor's house and selling left over Hall materials toward constructing a new structure.<sup>33</sup>

Understandably she was well remembered. For years an adult women's Sunday School group was called the Musa Hall Class. Further, her will ultimately bequeathed her studio piano of 50+ years to First Baptist. In 1986 First Baptist's Senior Adult Class and church leaders formally presented the instrument to the church. Actually Miss Musa left the piano to Martin resident Mildred Burchard, a neighbor and music instructor, with the stipulation upon the latter's death the piano passed to the church. However, aging meant refurbishing was required. After that fellow First Baptist members celebrated Musa Hall's legacy in the First Baptist Fellowship Hall, the piano's new home. Reading from an aged copy, Rebecca Whitson Nielsen played "Nearer My God To Thee" on the same instrument on which she had lessons as a teen. Musa's former students said, in effect, during their sessions Miss Hall taught them Bible, practical living, manners, and geography. Her memory was definitely in good hands.<sup>34</sup>

For decades Musa Hall served admirably as a dedicated Bible instructor, music teacher, and church clerk. Those roles flowed naturally from her spiritual commitment to God and her church.

<sup>1</sup> Record Book I of First Baptist Church, Martin, Tennessee From 1895 to 1910, Members listed alphabetically in the front pages under columns by How and When joined; hereinafter cited as FBC, Book I, January 10, 1895, May 9, 1895, May 26, 1898, July 11, 1895, August 8, 1895, August 15, 1898.

<sup>2</sup> FBC, Book I, Alphabetical member listing of September, 1892. "The Melody Lingers" by Dr. H. H. Boston, Pastor, First Baptist Church, Martin, Tennessee, *The Church Musician*, November, 1950, p. 3; hereinafter cited as Boston, "Melody." Boston somehow claimed that Musa Hall professed Christ as her savior at age eleven and joined First Baptist as a fifteen year old. However, at most she was twelve years old in 1889 when her parents affiliated with the Martin church, but was fifteen when she joined that congregation. *Weakley County Press*, April 14, 1950, p. 1; hereinafter cited as WC Press.

<sup>3</sup> *Martin Centennial, 1873-1973*, June 28-July 4, 1973, Martin, Tennessee Centennial Company, Inc., Martin Tennessee, p. 30.

<sup>4</sup> WC Press, April 14, 1973, p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> T. H. Farmer, "History of First Baptist Church, Hall-Moody Institute and Baptist Builder and ETC," FBC, Book II, undated at the end of this volume, p. 5. This statement accompanied that history, "This historical article was drawn up by Deacon T.H. Farmer."; WC Press, April 14, 1950, p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> Boston, "Melody," p. 3; and Conversation of Rebecca Whitson (Mrs. Ronald) Nielsen with Marvin Downing, January 24, 2012, at her Martin home; hereinafter cited as Nielsen and Downing, January 24, 2012. Rebecca was an organ student of Miss Musa.

<sup>7</sup> FBC, Book, II, September 20, 1914, March 3, 10, and 21, 1915, April 7, 1915, December 1, 1915, July 12, 1916, and August 2, 1916; Boston, "Melody," p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> FBC, Book IV, May 10, 1922; and FBC, Book V, December 26, 1928.

<sup>9</sup> FBC, Book V, December 5, 1928; FBC, Book VI, October 18, 1933; and FBC, Book VIII, December 9, 1942.

<sup>10</sup> FBC, Book IV, August 8, 1923, June 11, 1924, Book V, March 21, 1928, Book VIII, April 28, 1943, and Book VII, January 29, 1941. Conversation of Marilucille Dodd (Mrs. Elmer) Counce and Marvin Downing on the Martin We Care Ministries parking lot during her clothing donation there on September 22, 2011.

<sup>11</sup> FBC, Book IX, November 10, 1948; and FBC, Book VI, September 5, 1934, and August 9, 1933.

<sup>12</sup> Nielsen and Downing, January 24, 2012; and FBC, Book III, November 17, 1920, January 19, 1921, and February 2, 1921.

<sup>13</sup> FBC, Book IV, January 4, 1922, January 22, 1922, January 3, 1923, March 7, 1923, and September 12, 1923.

<sup>14</sup> FBC, Book IV, April 1, 1925, May 6, 1925, and June 3, 1925; FBC, Book VIII, July 7, 1943; and Book IX, July 20, 1949.

<sup>15</sup> FBC, Book VIII, April 16, 1947, May 14, 1947. Duncan was a layman who about then was also the Music Director. FBC, Book VIII, May 2, 1945.

<sup>16</sup> FBC, Book VI, March 16, 1932, and September 28, 1932; FBC, Book VI, August 28, 1933; FBC, Book VI, November 5, 1934; and FBC, Book VIII, April 28, 1943.

<sup>17</sup> FBC, Book IV, March 4, 1925.

<sup>18</sup> FBC, Book V, March 6, 1928; Book VI, January 5, 1931, May 4, 1932, May 10, 1933, and June 6, 1934.

<sup>19</sup> FBC, Book II, January 10, 1915, and FBC, Book III, November 18, 1921. Rev. Elwood Doss, the former FBC Minister of Music in the 1980s and 1990s, shared the following information with Downing about Bartlett's life and "Victory in Jesus." "The text and music were written by Eugene Monroe Bartlett. Born in Missouri in 1885 and trained at the Hall-Moody Institute, he began teaching at singing schools. He quickly became a much sought-after teacher, conducting singing schools in several states. If it were not for his efforts along with his friend, Albert Brumley, churches today would have far fewer people who can read music. In 1918 he established the Hartford Music Company which continues to this day run by the family of his friend. He pushed the use of shaped notes. After writing several hundred hymns, most of them in a few short minutes, he suffered a stroke, ending his traveling and speaking career. Confined to one room in 1939, unable to communicate, dying, he spent almost a month writing this last song. Although broken in health, unable to speak, he wanted to demonstrate that his faith had not cracked under the suffering. It would be two years before he died in 1941. [www.preparingforeternity.org](http://www.preparingforeternity.org)."

<sup>20</sup> FBC, Book I, May 21, 1903, October 18, 1908, and October 25, 1908.

<sup>21</sup> FBC, Book I, December 19, 1909. Author's note: The names of First Baptist members are listed alphabetically in the front of

the book. Besides columns for members' names, the other columns are: "How and when received; How and why dismissed; Remarks." FBC, Book II, January 29, 1911, and April 5, 1911.

<sup>22</sup> Book II, May 21, 1913; FBC, Book III, April 3, 1918, April 21, 1918, May 1, 1918, and October 6, 1918.

<sup>23</sup> FBC, Book VII, November 8, 1939, and February 4, 1942.

<sup>24</sup> FBC, Book I, January 1, 1896, Book III, June 2, 1918, June 12, 1918, and Book VII, September 9, 1942. Also "See Index page under letter 'G' for resolutions in Memory of Bro. I.. N. PENICK." September 16, 1942.

<sup>25</sup> FBC, Book VI, September 25, 1932, September 28, 1932, April 28, 1935, Book VIII, May 15, 1946, and May 29, 1946; and FBC, Book VII, July 27, 1941.

<sup>26</sup> FBC, Book VII, March 2, 1940. Her mother's obituary contained the following information: Mary Catherine McClelland who was born May 4, 1854, became Mrs. Benjamin F. Hall. She married Dr. Hall on February 29, 1876. She was preceded in death by her husband, 2 sons—Rush and Frank; she was survived by her daughter Musa Leona. To the end Mrs. Hall Alert appreciated the goodness and attention of loved ones, doctor, pastor, church, friends and faithful colored folk. Weakley County Press, March 8, 1940, p. 5.

<sup>27</sup> FBC, Book IV, March 1, 1922, April 9, 1922, May 7, 1922, May 10, 1922, and June 4, 1922.

<sup>28</sup> FBC, Book VII, November 27, 1938.

<sup>29</sup> FBC, Book II, October 22, 1913; November 12, 1913, December 28, 1913, January 7, 1914, February 1, 1914, March 4, 1914, September 2, 1914, and November 1, 1914.

<sup>30</sup> FBC, Book II, January 6, 1915, and February 10, 1915.

<sup>31</sup> WC Press, April 7, 1950, p. 1, April 14, 1950, p. 1; and Boston, "Melody," p. 30.

<sup>32</sup> Boston, "Melody," p. 3, 30.

<sup>33</sup> FBC, Book IX, April 26, 1950, and May 3, 1950.

<sup>34</sup> Robert Nanney, "Piano Is Continuing Reminder of Miss Musa's Legacy of Giving," WC Press, pp. 1-2.

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